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AUTHOR Jones, Doris; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate students at Northern Arizona University interviewed and surveyed 20 staff members at Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD) on the Navajo Reservation and 14 parents of exceptional Navajo children enrolled in KUSD. Both groups were asked to identify challenges affecting the working relationship between parents and school on a rural reservation, the effective techniques used by KUSD in contacting and working with parents, and potential elements that could strengthen school-parent interactions. The staff indicated that the major challenges were geographic distance and sensitivity to cultural differences in discourse. Parents were generally satisfied with the district's efforts but indicated a need for more communication at the secondary level. Staff and parents felt that the use of home liaisons, bilingual Navajo staff members who make home visits, was a powerful technique for enhancing active communication between school and parents. Treating parents with respect, encouraging their continued assistance in their child's education, and assisting them in understanding parental rights were considered essential. The parents appreciated KUSD efforts to meet transportation needs of exceptional students and to connect families with related services or medical attention through local agencies. Among staff's seven suggested improvements were increased training for parents, obtaining parents' viewpoints and feelings, and including a parent participation component in school activities. Among parents' four recommendations were having more informational meetings and providing more pamphlets, handouts, and awareness training to parents. (TD)

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Duree Scot
Tamara Joseph
Britt Tallis
Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ
KUSD, Kayenta, AZ

WORKING WITH NAVAJO PARENTS OF EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

Introduction

Parent involvement is essential for the success of all students. Teacher organizations strongly believe that students who have parents actively involved in their education are more successful (Novakowski, 1996). Public Law 94 - 142 and Public Law 99 - 457 mandate that parents have the right to be actively involved as decision makers in their child's Individual Educational Programs (Bishop, 1991). Henderson, Marburger and Ooms (1986) indicated three major prerequisites for schools to follow which advocate parent involvement. First, parents are most likely to be involved in their child's educational program if the school climate is helpful, open and friendly. Second, parents are most likely to be involved when there is frequent, clear two-way communication. Third, parents are more likely to become involved when they are treated as equals in collaborative pursuits.

Working with parents of exceptional children in rural areas can be very rewarding and challenging. In rural areas such as Kayenta, Arizona on the Navajo Reservation schools are required to consider the linguistic as well as cultural needs of their families. Many parents may live as far as 45 miles from the school on dirt roads. Others are working a great distance from their home site herding sheep and cattle. These factors create distinctive challenges in reaching parents. Conditions are further complicated by the very specific communication needs between the school and the parents of students with disabilities (Ysseldyke, Algozzine & Thurlow, 1992).

Kayenta is located in the heart of the Navajo Reservation which covers approximately 24,000 square miles and encompasses three states (Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah) making it the largest Indian Reservation in the United States. 155,276 Navajos reside on the reservation (Tsosie, 1990). There are a few major communities such as Kayenta, Window Rock, Tuba City, and Chinle, but most of the reservation is spread among the rugged terrain of mesas, mountains, and high arid desert.

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The total enrollment of Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD) as recorded in the 1995-96 school year was 2,799. Ninety-four percent of the parents who have children attending KUSD declared on language surveys that Navajo is the primary language spoken in the home. The total population of special education students in the Kayenta District is 206. Seventy-six percent of students currently enrolled in special education have parents who stated that Navajo is the primary language spoken at home (Turl, 1996).

Purpose

The focus of this paper is to present the cultural and linguistic considerations necessary to work with the Navajo parents of exceptional children. Successful techniques for working with parents which are currently used by KUSD are discussed. Additional information from the survey and interview data are also discussed.

Methods

This informal study was designed and the data were collected by undergraduate students currently enrolled in the Northern Arizona University Rural Special Education Project in Kayenta, Arizona, with the direction of university instructors. The students distributed surveys and conducted all interviews. Responses to individual questions from the surveys and interviews were analyzed to identify evolving themes. Additionally the students also accumulated, analyzed, and interpreted all data.

The participants targeted in this pilot study consisted of 20 KUSD staff members. The staff members were a combination of administrators, home liaisons (bilingual Navajo staff members who make home visits), and special education personnel. The 14 parental participants were all parents of exceptional children. Each of the parents currently have children enrolled in KUSD.

The Kayenta District staff included 10 Native American participants and 10 Anglo participants. A total of eight Kayenta staff members were interviewed and 12 of the staff members were given surveys that were later collected by the researchers.

The parental participants included 13 Native American parents and one Anglo parent. A total of 13 parents were directly interviewed by the researchers. Out of the 13 parents interviewed, 8 requested that the survey be interpreted for them in Navajo by one of the researchers. One parent completed a survey that was later collected by the researchers.

<u>KUSD staff interview and survey questions</u>:

1. What are the challenges working with parents in a rural area such as the Navajo Nation?
2. What are some techniques which have been used effectively working with parents in your area?
3. What elements could be added to strengthen the school to parent interaction?

<u>Parental interview and survey questions</u>:

1. Have you had any challenges in communicating or getting assistance to meet your child's educational needs because of the rural setting you live in? Please cite examples.
2. What are some of the techniques the school district has successfully used in contacting or working with you for the benefit of your child? Please cite some examples.

3. What elements could be added to possibly strengthen the school to parent interaction in your opinion in your rural area? Please cite some examples.

Kayenta School District Faculty and Staff Results

The responses to question number one (What are the challenges working with parents in a rural area such as the Navajo Nation?) revealed that the majority of school personnel felt that the challenges they faced were largely due to the diverse geographical location of the school district. One school employee stated that "cultural considerations, geographical distance and socioeconomic factors" presented very unique challenges to the staff of KUSD. Several responses revealed the need for many parents to have IEP meetings, parental rights, and teacher conferences interpreted into their primary language, Navajo.

Other linguistics concerns also were generated in the survey such as sensitivity to cultural discourse between two very different cultures. Kayenta staff participants (Navajo and Anglo) both mentioned that understanding the Navajo cultural was essential in bridging any communication difficulties between the parents and the school. Navajo is an Athabaskan language. Discourse differences between Athabaskan and English speakers are well documented. Even when a Navajo speaks English well, discourse differences from their primary language can hamper communication (Scollon and Scollon, 1981). Therefore, it presents staff who are working with Navajo students with the need to become familiar with a basic knowledge of the culture and the discourse differences between English speaking staff and Navajo parents.

Ms. Susie Gilmore is a Navajo who began her career in Kayenta Unified School district in 1981. She has worked as a paraprofessional, tutor, and spent the past seven years as the special education home liaison. She speaks Navajo and English fluently. Ms. Gilmore was brought up in a home rich in traditional Navajo culture. Information obtained from Ms. Gilmore indicates several important guidelines to remember when communicating with Navajo Parents:

1. Rarely establish eye contact.
2. The elder's opinions are greatly respected.
3. The tone of voice is kept at the same level.
4. There should be no pointing of the finger.
5. Do not interrupt others when they are speaking.
6. Wait your turn to speak (Gilmore, 1997).

Additional methods identified from the data were KUSD efforts to include parents as partners in their children's education. Also, taking steps to make parents feel welcomed and comfortable in the school setting were noted.

In response to question two (What are some techniques which have been used effectively working with parents in your area?), KUSD staff members predominately reported that the schools efforts to make parent contact was a powerful tool. Listed among these techniques was the effective use of home liaisons. Additionally, it was mentioned that teachers went on home visits with liaisons to enhance active communication between the school and parents. "Treating the parents with respect, encouraging their continued assistance in their child's education, and complimenting them on participation in their child's education" were considered essential in keeping good communication open between parents and the school. Other surveys indicated

assisting parents in understanding their parental rights was considered a priority for KUSD special education staff.

Responses for question number three (What elements could be added to strengthen the school to parent interaction?), suggested to continue to build on already established techniques. A Native American administrator stated on their survey "I believe that KUSD Special Education Department has gone over and beyond in strengthening the school-parent interaction." The majority of staff responses mention repeatedly the efforts of the home liaisons in particular. All home liaisons employed by KUSD are Navajo from the local community, have in depth knowledge of traditional Navajo culture, and speak Navajo and English fluently.

Other suggestions for improvements that could be made were as follows:

- Training Parents specifically in their roles in Individual Education Plans and School Evaluation Teams.
- Obtaining through interviews and observations, viewpoints and feelings of parents.
- Communication through the media (such as announcing appropriate meetings).
- Guest Speakers for parent meetings who would give in depth training concerning parental rights, early intervention, and transition plans.
- All teachers should be required to make personal contact with parents even if there is no apparent intervention needed. This will keep the door of communication open.
- Activities taught at school that would have a parent participation component included at home.
- Provide transportation for parents if needed.

Parental Participant Results

Parental responses to question one (Have you had any challenges in communicating or getting assistance to meet your child's educational needs because of the rural setting you live in?) indicated that the majority of parents (kindergarten - eighth grade) were satisfied with the communication from their child's special education teacher. One parent of a high school student revealed that communication difficulties increased with the age of their child. Intensifying the focus on parent involvement is an important need for students at secondary level. One study implies that more active involvement in decision making by parents at the high school level and special training concerning parental roles increases the feeling of partnership between secondary special education teams and parents (Taylor, 1992).

The parental responses to question two (What are some of the techniques the school district has successfully used in contacting or working with you for the benefit of your child?), expressed that KUSD efforts in meeting the transportation needs of exceptional students were greatly valued by the parents. Other valued services mentioned in the responses were the efforts of KUSD to connect families to special related services or even arrange special medical attention for their child through local agencies.

The responses to question three (What elements could be added to possibly strengthen the school to parent interaction in your opinion in your rural area?) disclosed the importance of the KUSD home liaisons. Because of limited telephone service many parents are dependent on the home liaisons as their primary source of communication concerning their children's program. One parent said, "The school has come out to my home to explain what kind of services are given to

my child at school." Other responses from in town parents indicated parents were contacted by phone or personally by the home liaison or teachers.

Additional methods that parents suggested that may strengthen school interactions were as follows:

- Keep a log book which would travel to and from school each day for parents
- and teachers to write notes back and forth.
- Have more informational meetings.
- Provide more pamphlets and handouts and awareness training for parents.

Conclusion

As indicated in the data, awareness of cultural values and discourse differences between English speakers and Navajo speakers are a fundamental concern to KUSD. The district is cognizant of their responsibility to provide information to parents in their primary language. Home liaisons are primarily used to insure that the parents of exceptional children are familiar with their parental rights. Additionally, the home liaisons establish personal contact with parents to make sure parents are informed in detail of their child's program.

Information gathered during the interview process from administrators and special education staff indicate that the KUSD staff are sensitive to the continued needs of parents of exceptional children. KUSD demonstrates a willingness to provide on going training for the parents of exceptional children.

The data also reflects that parents who have exceptional children enrolled in KUSD were generally pleased with the communication efforts of the school district. The parents also recognized that the home liaisons are instrumental in providing knowledge about their child's program in their primary language. The data also revealed that parents of exceptional children feel informed of their parental rights, but would welcome additional training in the area of special education parental rights and programs.

KUSD continues to provide consistent services to special education students. Presently five home liaisons travel daily throughout the 30 mile radius of KUSD to communicate the needs of students to their parents. KUSD embraces the Navajo culture to better enhance the education of all the students in the Kayenta area. KUSD realizes its responsibility to parents to provide open two-way communication for parents, create a welcoming environment and take into consideration the ruralness, unique language, and culture of the families whom it serves.

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